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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANILA 002393

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR AND NEW PRESIDENTIAL ADVISER DISCUSS
PEACE TALKS

REF: MANILA 2198 (CHARGE MEETS MILF LEADER)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Newly appointed Presidential Peace Process Adviser Annabelle Abaya told the Ambassador November 5 she hoped to further the Philippine government's peace negotiations with a variety of insurgent groups in the eight months remaining in President Arroyo's term of office. The GRP would continue in the coming days to engage with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), in advance of more formal peace talks. Abaya felt her own years of work on peace talks with the communist New People's Army (NPA) had earned her some trust from the other side, but she worried the NPA seemed unreasonably demanding and faced various internal difficulties. Abaya also noted the Philippine government preferred that the EU retain NPA leader Jose Maria Sison on its list of designated terrorists, although the EU seemed likely to support his delisting. Factionalism within the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) complicated GRP efforts to build on the 1996 peace agreement with that group. The Ambassador encouraged Abaya's efforts for constructive dialogue with the government's opponents, suggesting also a broader effort to build public awareness and depoliticize negotiations. Abaya welcomed USG projects that could help reintegrate former insurgents into mainstream society. End Summary.

MILF TALKS

2. (C) In a November 5 courtesy call by the Ambassador, accompanied by the DCM and Poloff, Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process Secretary Annabelle Abaya explained she hoped to make progress in multiple negotiations during the final months of the Arroyo administration, though she acknowledged time could be insufficient, given that President Arroyo is slated to leave office in June 2010. Abaya explained that GRP negotiators would meet with Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) counterparts in Kuala Lumpur the week of November 9-13 to pave the way for more formal peace talks. The Malaysian facilitator for those talks, Datuk Othman, would visit Manila on November 9. To provide support for the peace process with the MILF, Abaya suggested that she would focus on increasing social dialogue among communities, politicians, and NGOs in Mindanao in order to avoid a repeat of the August 2008 collapse of the territorial agreement, which she attributed to a lack of social dialogue and lack of funding for a public relations plan that she had been asked to design.

3. (C) The Ambassador and DCM provided a readout of the DCM's visit to the Moro Islamic Liberation Front's headquarters at Camp Darapanan (reftel), saying the Embassy believed both the

GRP and the MILF shared the ambition to reach a peaceful settlement. Abaya agreed but cautioned that implementation of a peace agreement would be difficult, even with President Arroyo's sincere backing. Still, she hoped the MILF would continue its engagement with the government and not be deterred by errant negative comments by senior politicians, such as Secretary of the Interior Ronaldo Puno, who claimed that the MILF bore responsibility for the mid-October kidnapping of Irish missionary Michael Sinnott. Abaya indicated she considered Puno's remarks inappropriate; the GRP should first leverage the MILF's assistance in freeing Sinnott, and could seek to assign blame for his abduction afterwards. It was first and foremost necessary to gain Sinnott's safe release.

THE COMMUNISTS

14. (C) Abaya appeared more confident about the prospects for progress in talks with the communist New People's Army (NPA), although she did not foresee an imminent agreement. Before assuming her new post, she had informally communicated with exiled NPA leader Jose Marie Sison via a Facebook website, and she has since sought to maintain a more communicative relationship, showing her willingness to "just talk," which she has adopted as a new slogan. At a recent meeting of the two sides' legal panels, they were able, for the first time in months, to have straightforward conversation. Abaya said her long work on the GRP-NPA peace talks had won her a measure of trust from the NPA and could help boost mutual confidence between the parties.

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15. (C) In her communications with Sison, Abaya had relayed her pessimism about the NPA's position, which was characterized by an undue sense of entitlement. The NPA should understand that the government had worked hard to resume the ceasefire, and that it had put forth great effort to reinstate immunity guarantees -- and yet the communists continued to make more demands, unfairly discounting the positive actions the government had taken. Abaya said the challenges for the NPA included unifying its voices and accommodating varied opinions in its positions. The NPA also faced the challenge of building the next generation of communist leaders, as it was proving unable to recruit young people to its cause. The 2010 elections would be important to the NPA, which needed fundamentally to reinvent itself. To further help the NPA acquire a more rational position in negotiations, she was considering ways to educate NPA members on how modern economies function. It was no longer realistic, she said, for the NPA to put agriculture at the center of its economic reform plan when that sector accounted for less than 30% of the workforce.

16. (C) The Ambassador agreed that Sison should assume a more realistic position in negotiations with the government, and suggested that some progress in the peace talks could eventually make it possible for Sison to return to the Philippines. To encourage Sison to buy into the peace process, Abaya said she wanted to make Sison feel he was being recognized for the "sacrifices" he made for the Philippines.

17. (C) The GRP and NPA were preparing to recommence formal talks within the next three to four weeks, Abaya said. She noted the EU might remove Sison from its list of terrorists. Doing so would eliminate some of the GRP's leverage over him, and the GRP preferred for Sison to remain designated as a terrorist -- but Abaya acknowledged talks had not succeeded during his time on the EU's list.

MNLF TALKS

18. (C) Abaya said the GRP and the Moro National Liberation

Front (MNLF) were still working toward a joint proposal to address unfulfilled commitments made in the 1996 Final Peace Agreement. In order to achieve a comprehensive peace, it was critical for the two sides to have a deep and lasting conversation, but MNLF factionalism complicated the GRP's efforts. The Ambassador welcomed the government's continued efforts to improve ties with the MNLF, saying that achieving a durable peace with even one of the Philippines' insurgencies would have a significant impact on the country's security and economic environment, and a peace agreement with one group could facilitate the conclusion of agreements with the others.

BROAD PRESCRIPTIONS

¶9. (C) The Ambassador encouraged GRP efforts to brief presidential candidates on the various peace talks, and she suggested that the GRP could also usefully seek to inform the broader public, so that these negotiations might be less politicized. Abaya said the USG could assist her efforts by continuing to undertake development projects in Mindanao. She noted in particular her hope to send reformed NPA fighters abroad, so they could acquire a more global perspective and learn skills to facilitate their integration into society. The Ambassador mentioned the USG's prior training of young men in auto repair, adding that involving women and children in projects also helped to reduce violence.

MINDANAO RECOVERY TASKFORCE INEFFECTIVE

¶10. (C) Abaya noted that the government's plan to provide broad, coordinated humanitarian assistance in conflict-affected areas of Mindanao -- known as Task Force HELP (Health, Education, Livelihood, Progress) -- has achieved little since the President created the group in June. News about the effort fizzled shortly after it was announced, Abaya said, and interagency confusion about the responsibilities of the Task Force contributed to its ineffectiveness. Under Abaya's initiative, the Task Force would meet in early November in Davao, bringing all relevant government agencies together to craft a strategy for the program. Abaya intended to continue to make use of NGOs in Mindanao as purveyors of humanitarian assistance, since they

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proved themselves to be far more efficient than the government, which was hobbled by high administrative costs.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) With her extensive background in peace negotiations, Abaya has strong credentials for her position and a unique driving ambition -- but perhaps lacks concrete proposals that could be implemented during her anticipated brief tenure. We found her well informed, reasonable, and committed to the difficult tasks ahead. While it would take a major effort from both sides to conclude a final peace agreement with the MILF -- and even more so with the NPA -- before Arroyo's term ends, developments over the coming months could have a significant impact on the next administration's interest in continuing serious talks with its foes.

KENNEY